

LETTER FROM J.J. ROUSSEAU  
TO  
M. DE VOLTAIRE

18 August 1756

[1] Your latest Poems, Sir, reached me in my solitude, and although all my friends know of my love for your writings, I do not know at whose instance these might have come to me, if not yours. I found both of them enjoyable and instructive, and recognized the master's hand; and I believe that I owe you thanks for the copy as well as for the work. I cannot say that every part appears to me equally good; but the things in it that I find displeasing only make me feel all the more confident about the ones that transport me. It is not without effort that I sometimes arm my reason against the charms of your Poetry; but it is in order to render my admiration more worthy of your works that I try not to admire them indiscriminately.

[2] I shall do more, Sir; I shall forthrightly tell you not about the beauties I believed I felt in these two poems, which task would daunt my laziness, nor even about the flaws which people cleverer than I may perhaps find in them, but about the displeasures which right now perturb the liking I took for your lessons, and I shall tell you about them while still moved by a first reading in which my heart avidly listened to yours, loving you as my brother, honoring you as my Master, and flattering myself that you will recognize in my intentions the candor of an upright soul, and in what I say the tone of a friend of the truth speaking to a Philosopher. Besides, the more your second poem enchants me, the more freely do I side against the first; for if you did not hesitate to be at odds with yourself, why should I hesitate to share your opinion? I can only believe [1060] that you are not strongly attached to sentiments which you refute so well.

[3] All my objections are, then, directed at your poem about the Lisbon disaster, because I expected from it effects worthier of the humanity that seems to have inspired it. You charge Pope and Leibniz with insulting our evils by maintaining that all is well [*or*: good],



and you so greatly magnify the picture of our miseries that you heighten our sense of them; instead of the solace I had hoped for, you only distress me. It is as if you feared that I might not see clearly enough how unhappy I am; and believed that you would greatly calm me by proving that all is bad.

[4] Make no mistake about it, Sir; the effect is the very opposite of what you intend. This optimism which you find so cruel yet consoles me amid the very pains which you depict as unbearable.

[5] Pope's poem allays my evils and inclines me to patience, yours embitters my suffering, incites me to grumble, and, by depriving me of everything but a shaken hope, reduces me to despair. In this odd discord between what you prove and what I experience, do calm the perplexity that troubles me, and tell me which of the two is deceiving itself, sentiment or reason. Pope and Leibniz tell me, "Man, have patience. Your evils are a necessary effect of your nature and of the constitution of this universe. The eternal and beneficent Being who governs you would have wished to safeguard you from them. Among all possible economies he chose the one that combined the least evil with the most good, or (to say the same thing even more bluntly, if need be), if he did not do better, it is that he could not do better."

[6] Now what does your poem tell me? "Suffer forever, unhappy man. If there is a God who has created you, no doubt he is omnipotent; he could have prevented all your evils: hence do not hope that they will ever end; for there is no understanding why you exist, if not to suffer and to die." I do not know what might be more consoling about such a doctrine than about optimism and even about fatalism. For my own part, I admit that it seems to me even more cruel than Manicheanism. If the puzzle [1061] of the origin of evil forced you to diminish one of God's perfections, why would you want to justify his power at the expense of his goodness? If one has to choose between two errors, I prefer the first.

[7] You do not wish, Sir, to have your work looked upon as a work against Providence; and I shall certainly refrain from calling it that, although you taxed a book in which I pleaded the case of mankind against itself with being a writing against mankind. I know the distinction that has to be made between an author's intentions and the consequences that can be drawn from his doctrine. However, my just self-defense obliges me to point out to you that my



aim, in depicting human miseries, was excusable and, I believe, even praiseworthy; for I showed men how they bring their miseries upon themselves, and hence how they might avoid them.

[8] I do not see that one can seek the source of moral evil anywhere but in man, free, perfected, hence corrupted; and as for physical evils, if, as it seems to me, it is a contradiction for matter to be both sentient and insentient, they are inevitable in any system of which man is a part; and the question, then, is not why is man not perfectly happy, but why does he exist. Moreover, I believe I have shown that except for death, which is an evil almost solely because of the preparations made in anticipation of it, most of our physical evils are also of our own making. To continue with your subject of Lisbon, you must admit, for example, that nature had not assembled two thousand six- or seven-story houses there, and that if the inhabitants of that great city had been more evenly dispersed and more simply lodged, the damage would have been far less, and perhaps nil. All would have fled at the first shock, and the following day they would have been seen twenty miles away, just as cheerful as if nothing had happened; but they were set on staying, on stubbornly standing by hovels, on risking further shocks, because what they would have left behind was worth more than what they could take with them. How many unfortunates perished in this disaster for wanting to take, one his clothes, another his papers, a third his money? Does not everyone know that a man's person has become his least part, and that it is [1062] almost not worth the trouble to save when he has lost everything else?

[9] You would have wished (as who would not have wished the same?) that the quake had happened in the depths of a wilderness rather than in Lisbon. Can there be any doubt that there also are quakes in wildernesses? But we do not talk about them, because they do no harm [*mal*] to City Gentlemen, the only men of whom we take any notice: indeed, they hardly do any even to the animals and the Savages living scattered in remote places, unafraid of roofs collapsing or houses burning down. But what would enjoying such a privilege mean? Would it then follow that the order of the world has to change according to our whims, that nature has to be subjugated to our laws, and that all we need do in order to forbid it an earthquake in a given place is to build a City there?



[10] There are events that often strike us more or less depending on the angle from which we view them, and that lose much of the horror they inspire at first sight once we take the trouble to examine them more closely. I learned in *Zadig*, and nature daily confirms it, that a quick death is not always a real evil, and may sometimes pass for a relative good. Of the many people crushed under the rubble of Lisbon, some, no doubt, escaped greater misfortunes: and notwithstanding how touching such a description may be, and how much matter it provides for poetry, it is not certain that a single one of these unfortunates suffered more than if, in the ordinary course of things, he spent a long time anxiously waiting for the death that took him by surprise. Is there a sadder end than that of a dying man overwhelmed by useless attentions, whom his lawyer and his heirs will not let breathe, whom Doctors kill in his bed at their leisure, and whom barbarous Priests artfully make savour death? As for me, I see everywhere that the evils to which nature subjects us are much less cruel than those which we add to them.

[11] But however ingenious we may be in exacerbating our miseries by dint of ever fancier institutions, we have as yet not been able to perfect ourselves to the point of generally making life a burden to ourselves and preferring nothingness to our existence; otherwise discouragement and despair would soon have taken hold of [1063] most people, and mankind could not have long endured. Now, if it is better for us to be than not to be, this would be enough to justify our existence, even if we should have no compensation to expect for the evils we have to suffer, and even if these evils were as great as you depict them. But on this subject it is difficult to find good faith among men, and good computations among Philosophers; because in comparing goods and evils, the latter always forget the sweet sentiment of existence, independent of any other sensation, and the vanity of scorning death prompts the former to malign life; rather like women who, given a stained dress and scissors, pretend to prefer holes to stains.

[12] You think with Erasmus that few people would wish to be reborn in the same conditions in which they lived; but some peg their wares very high who would reduce them considerably if they saw any prospect of making a sale. Besides, Sir, whom would you have me believe you consulted about this? Rich people, perhaps,



sated with false pleasures but ignorant of the genuine ones, forever bored with life and forever afraid to lose it; perhaps men of letters, the most sedentary of all orders of men, the most unhealthy, the most reflective, and consequently the most unhappy. Would you like to find men who are easier to deal with, or at least usually more sincere, and whose voice should be given preference if only because they are the more numerous? Consult an honest burgher who has led an obscure and tranquil life, without projects and without ambition; a good artisan who lives comfortably off his trade; even a peasant, not from France, where they maintain that peasants must be made to die of poverty in order to make us live, but from the country where you are, for example, and in general from any free country. I dare set it down as a fact that in the upper Valais there is possibly not a single Mountaineer who is dissatisfied with his almost automaton life, and who would not willingly trade even Paradise itself for being endlessly reborn to vegetate thus perpetually. These differences lead me to believe that it is often our abuse of life that makes it burdensome to us; and I have a far less favorable opinion of those [1064] who regret having lived, than of him who can say with Cato: "I do not regret having lived, inasmuch as I have lived in a way that allows me to think I was not born in vain." This is not to say that the wise man may not sometimes move on voluntarily without grumbling and despair, when nature or fortune distinctly conveys to him the order to depart. But in the ordinary course of things, human life is not, all in all, a bad gift, whatever may be the evils with which it is strewn; and while it is not always an evil to die, it is very seldom one to live.

[13] Our different ways of thinking about all these topics show me why I find a number of your proofs rather inconclusive. For I am not unaware of how much more easily human reason assumes the cast of our opinions than of truth, and of how, between two men of opposite opinions, what one believes demonstrated, the other often regards as nothing but sophistry. For example, when you attack the chain of beings so well described by Pope, you say that it is not true that the world could not subsist if one removed a single atom from it. In support of this you cite M. de Crouzas; then you add that nature is subject to no precise measure or precise form; that no planet moves in an absolutely regular orbit; that no known being has a strictly mathematical figure; that no precise



quantity is required for any operation whatsoever; that nature never acts rigorously; that there is therefore no reason to assert that one atom less on earth would be the cause of the earth's destruction. I admit to you that regarding all this, Sir, I am more struck by the force of the assertion than of the reasoning, and that on this occasion I would sooner yield to your authority than to your proofs.

[14] As regards M. de Crouzas, I have not read his writing against Pope, and am perhaps not capable of understanding it; but this much is perfectly certain, that I shall not concede to him what I shall have denied you, and that I trust his authority as little as I do his proofs. Far from thinking that nature is not subject to precision with regard to quantities and figures, I am inclined to believe that, on the contrary, only nature rigorously conforms to this precision, because only nature is capable of exactly adapting means to ends, and matching force to resistance. As for these supposed irregularities, can there be any doubt that they all have their physical cause, and is the failure to perceive it [reason] enough to deny that it exists? These apparent irregularities are without a doubt due to laws which we do not know and which nature follows just as faithfully as it does those we do know; to some agent we do not perceive, and whose interference or assistance in all of its operations has fixed measures: otherwise we would have to say explicitly that there are actions without a principle and effects without a cause; which is at odds with all philosophy.

[15] Let us assume two weights in equilibrium, and yet unequal; add to the smaller the quantity by which they differ; either the two weights will still remain in equilibrium, in which case there is a cause without an effect; or the equilibrium will be broken, in which case there is an effect without a cause. But if the weights were made of iron, and a tiny magnet were concealed underneath one of them, then the precision of nature would deprive this equilibrium of the appearance of precision, and the more exact it was, the more it would appear to lack exactness. There is not a single figure, not a single operation, not a single law in the physical world regarding which one could not give some example similar to the one I have just suggested about weight.

[16] You say that no known being has a strictly mathematical figure; I ask you, Sir, whether there is a possible figure that is not strictly mathematical, whether the most bizarre curve is not as



regular in the eyes of nature as a perfect circle is in ours. I imagine, further, that if any body could possess this apparent regularity, it would only be the universe itself, assuming it to be a plenum and finite; for mathematical figures, being nothing but abstractions, have a relation only to themselves; whereas all the figures of natural bodies are relative to other bodies and to movements that modify them; so that this would still not prove anything against the precision of nature, even if we agreed on how you understand the word *precision*.

[17] You draw a distinction between events that have effects, and those that do not. I doubt the distinction is sound. Every event seems to me necessarily to have some effect, moral or physical, or a combination [1066] of the two, but which is not always perceived because the filiation of events is even more difficult to follow than that of men; in general, since one should not look for effects more considerable than the events that produce them, the minuteness of causes frequently makes inquiry ridiculous, although the effects are certain, just as several almost imperceptible effects frequently combine to produce a considerable event. Add to this that a given effect does not fail to occur even though it does so outside the body that produces it. Thus the dust a carriage raises may do nothing to the motion of the vehicle and yet influence that of the world; but since there is nothing foreign to the universe, everything that happens in it necessarily acts on the universe itself. Thus, Sir, your examples seem to me more ingenious than convincing; I see a thousand different reasons why it may perhaps not have been a matter of indifference to Europe that on a certain day the heiress of Burgundy had her hair dressed well or badly; nor to the destiny of Rome that Caesar turned his gaze to the right or to the left and spat to one side rather than the other on his way to the Senate the day he met his punishment there. In a word, recalling the grain of sand mentioned by Pascal, I am in some respects of your Brahman's opinion, and regardless of how one views things, it seems to me indisputable that while all events may not have sensible effects, they all have real effects, of which the human mind easily loses the thread, but which nature never confuses.

[18] You say that it is demonstrated that the heavenly bodies make their revolutions in non-resisting space. That was certainly a fine thing to demonstrate; but in the manner of the ignorant I place



very little faith in demonstrations that are beyond me. I should imagine that in order to construct this one, one would have reasoned more or less as follows:

[19] A given force acting in accordance with a given law must impart to the Stars a given motion in a non-resisting medium; now, the Stars exhibit exactly the motion calculated, hence there is no resistance. But who can tell whether there may not be a million other possible laws, not counting the genuine one, in terms of which the same motions could be explained even better in a fluid [medium] than in a vacuum by this law? Did not abhorrence of a vacuum long explain most of the effects [1067] that have since been attributed to the action of air? After other experiments subsequently refuted the abhorrence of a vacuum, did not everything turn out to be a plenum? Was not the vacuum restored on the basis of new calculations? Who can assure us that a still more exact system will not refute it again? Let us leave aside the innumerable difficulties a Physicist might raise about the nature of light and of lighted spaces; but do you in good faith believe that Bayle, for whose wisdom and restraint in matters of opinion I share your admiration, would have found your opinion all that well demonstrated? In general it seems to me that Skeptics forget themselves a little whenever they assume a dogmatic tone, and that they should use the term *to demonstrate* more soberly than anyone else. How likely is one to be believed if one boasts of knowing nothing while asserting so many things?

[20] However, you have made a correction in Pope's system that is very much to the point, by observing that there is no proportional gradation between the creatures and the Creator, and that, if the chain of created beings leads to God, it does so because he holds it, and not because he ends it.

[21] Regarding the good of the whole, preferable to that of its part, you have man say: "I must be as dear to my master, I, a thinking and a sentient being, as the planets, which are probably not sentient." No doubt this material universe must not be dearer to its Author than a single thinking and sentient being. But the system of this universe which produces, preserves, and perpetuates all thinking and sentient beings must be dearer to him than a single one of these beings; hence in spite of his goodness, or rather because of it, he may sacrifice something of the happiness of individuals to the preservation of the whole. I believe, I hope that I am worth



more in the eyes of God than the soil of a planet; but if the planets are inhabited, as is likely, why would I be worth more in his eyes than all the inhabitants of Saturn? Although one may ridicule these ideas, it is certain that all analogies favor Saturn's being populated, and that nothing but human pride opposes it. Now, once this population is assumed, it would seem that, even for God himself, preserving the universe is a moral issue, which is multiplied by the number of inhabited worlds.

[22] That a man's corpse feeds worms, wolves, or plants is not, I admit, a com[1068]pensation for that man's death; but if, in the system of the universe, it is necessary to the preservation of mankind that there be a cycle of substance between man, animals and vegetation, then one individual's particular evil contributes to the general good. I die, I am eaten by worms; but my children, my brothers will live as I have lived, and by the order of nature, I do for all men what Codrus, Curtius, the Decii, the Philaeni, and a thousand others did voluntarily for a small number of men.

[23] To come back, Sir, to the system you attack, I believe that one cannot examine it properly without carefully distinguishing between particular evil, whose existence no philosopher has ever denied, and general evil, which the optimist denies. The question is not whether each one of us suffers or not; but whether it was good that the universe be, and whether our evils were inevitable in the constitution of the universe. Thus the addition of one article, it seems, would make the proposition more exact; and instead of saying *All is well* [or: *good*], it might be preferable to say *The whole is good* or *All is good for the whole*. Then it is quite obvious that no human being could give direct proofs *pro* or *con*; for these proofs depend on a perfect knowledge of the world's constitution and of its Author's purpose, and this knowledge is indisputably beyond human intelligence. The true principles of optimism can be drawn neither from the properties of matter, nor from the mechanics of the universe, but only by inference from the perfections of God, who presides over all; so that one does not prove the existence of God by Pope's system, but Pope's system by the existence of God, and the question regarding the origin of evil is, without a doubt, derived from the question regarding Providence. If both of these questions have been dealt with equally unsatisfactorily, it is because Providence has always been reasoned about so poorly that the



absurd things that have been said about it have greatly muddled all the corollaries that could be drawn from this great and consoling dogma.

[24] The first to have spoiled the cause of God are the Priests and the Devout, who do not tolerate anything's happening according to the established order, but always have Divine justice intervene in purely natural events, [1069] and who, in order to make sure of being right, punish and chastise the wicked, [and say] the good are being either tested or rewarded, depending on whether they end up with goods or evils. I do not, myself, know whether this is good Theology; but I find it bad reasoning to base the proofs of Providence on both the *pro* and the *con*, and indiscriminately attribute to it everything that would equally happen without it.

[25] The Philosophers, for their part, seem to me scarcely more reasonable, when I see them reprove Heaven because they are not insentient, cry out that all is lost when they have a toothache, or are poor, or get robbed, and hold God responsible, as Seneca says, for looking after their luggage. If some tragic accident had caused Cartouche or Caesar to die in childhood, people would have said: what crimes did they commit? These two brigands lived, and we say: why were they allowed to live? By contrast, a devout person will say in the first case: God wanted to punish the father by taking his child; and in the second: God preserved the child to punish the people. Thus, regardless of the side which nature chose, Providence is always right among the devout, and always wrong among the Philosophers. Perhaps in the order of human things, it is neither wrong nor right, because everything depends on the common law, and there is no exception for anyone. It would seem that in the eyes of the Lord of the universe particular events here below are nothing, that his Providence is exclusively universal, that he leaves it at preserving the genera and species, and at presiding over the whole, without worrying about how each individual spends this short life. Need a wise King who wants everyone to live happily in his States inquire whether their inns are good? If they are bad, the passerby grumbles one night and laughs the rest of his days at such an inappropriate irritation. *Nature wanted us to be passers-by on earth, not residents.*

[26] In order to think correctly about this, it seems that things should be considered relatively in the physical order, and absolutely



in the moral order: so that the greatest idea of Providence I can conceive is that each material being be arranged in the best way possible in relation to the whole, and each [1070] intelligent and sentient being in the best way possible in relation to itself; which means, in other words, that for a being that senses its existence, existing is preferable to not existing. But this rule has to be applied to each sentient being's total duration, and not to some particular instants of its duration, such as human life; which shows how closely related the question of Providence is to that of the immortality of the soul, which happily I believe, although I am not unaware that reason can doubt it, and to the question of eternal punishments, which neither you nor I, nor any man who thinks well of God, will ever believe.

[27] If I trace these various questions to their common principle, it seems to me that they all relate to the question of the existence of God. If God exists, he is perfect; if he is perfect, he is wise, powerful and just; if he is wise and powerful, all is well; if he is just and powerful, my soul is immortal; if my soul is immortal, thirty years of life are nothing to me, and they are perhaps necessary to the preservation of the universe. If I am granted the first proposition, the ones that follow will never be shaken; if it is denied, there is no use arguing about its consequences.

[28] We are, neither of us, in this latter situation. At least I am so far from being able to presume anything of the kind of you from reading the collection of your works, that most of them offer me the grandest, gentlest, most consoling idea of the Divinity; and I much prefer a Christian after your fashion than after that of the Sorbonne.

[29] As for myself, I naïvely admit to you that on this point neither the *pro* nor the *con* seems to me demonstrated by the lights of reason, and that while the Theist founds his sentiment on no more than probabilities, the Atheist, less precise still, seems to me to found his sentiment on no more than some contrary possibilities. What is more, the objections, on either side, are always irrefutable, because they turn on things about which man has no genuine idea. I grant all this, and yet I believe in God just as strongly as I believe any other truth, because to believe and not to believe are the things that least depend on me, because the state of doubt is too violent a state for my soul, because when my reason wavers, my faith



cannot long remain [1071] in suspense, and decides without it; and finally because a thousand things I like better draw me toward the more consoling side and add the weight of hope to the equilibrium of reason.

[30] (I remember that what struck me most forcibly in my entire life, about the fortuitous arrangement of the universe, is the twenty-first philosophical thought, in which it is shown by the laws of probability that when the number of throws is infinite, the unlikelihood of an outcome is more than made up for by the frequency of the throws, and that consequently the mind should be more astonished by the hypothetical duration of chaos than by the actual birth of the universe. — On the assumption that motion is necessary, this is, to my mind, the most forceful thing ever said in this quarrel; and, as for myself, I declare that I know of no reply to it, true or false, that is consonant with common sense, lest it be to deny as false what one cannot know, that motion is essential to matter. On the other hand, to my knowledge no one has ever explained the generation of organized bodies and the perpetuity of seeds in terms of materialism; but there is this difference between these two opposed positions, that although both seem to me equally convincing, only the latter persuades me. As for the former, if someone were to tell me that, with one fortuitous throw of characters, the *Henriade* was composed, I would unhesitatingly deny it; it is more possible for chance to bring this about than for my mind to believe it, and I sense that there is a point at which moral impossibilities are for me equivalent to a physical certainty. Never mind what I may be told about the eternity of time, I have not traversed it; about the infinity of throws, I have not counted them; and my disbelief, however unphilosophical, will, in this, triumph over demonstration itself. I do not object to having what in this connection I call *proof of sentiment* called *prejudice*; and I do not offer this obstinacy of belief as a model; but, with what is perhaps unprecedented good faith, I offer it as an invincible disposition of my soul, which nothing will ever succeed in overcoming, of which I have so far had no occasion to complain, and which cannot be attacked without cruelty.)

[31] Here, then, is a truth which both of us take as our point of departure, with the help of which you sense how easy optimism [1072] is to defend and Providence to justify, and there is no need



to rehearse for your benefit the hackneyed but solid arguments that have so often been made on this subject. As for the Philosophers who do not grant the principle, one should not argue with them about these matters, because what is but a proof of sentiment for us cannot become a demonstration for them, and it is not reasonable to tell a man: You ought to believe this because I believe it. They, for their part, ought not to argue with us about these same matters, which are nothing but corollaries of the principal proposition which an honest adversary hardly dares to urge against them, and because they, in turn, would be wrong to demand to have the corollary proven to them independently of the proposition on which it is based. I think that they ought not to do so for another reason as well. Namely that there is something inhumane about troubling peaceful souls, and distressing men to no purpose, when what one is trying to teach them is neither certain nor useful. I think, in a word, following your example, that one cannot too forcefully attack the superstition that disturbs society, nor too much respect the Religion that upholds it.

[32] But, like you, I am indignant that each individual's faith does not enjoy the most perfect freedom, and that man dares to control the inner recesses of consciences which he cannot possibly enter; as if it depended on ourselves to believe or not to believe in matters where demonstration has no place, and reason could ever be enslaved to authority. Are the Kings of this world then inspectors in the next? and have they the right to torment their Subjects here below, in order to force them to go to Paradise? No; all human Government is by its nature restricted to civil duties; and regardless of what the Sophist Hobbes may have said on the subject, when a man serves the State well, he owes no one an account of how he serves God.

[33] I do not know whether this just Being will not some day punish every tyranny exercised in his name; I am quite sure, at least, that he will have no share in them, and that he will not deny eternal happiness to any nonbeliever who is virtuous and in good faith. Can I doubt, without offending his goodness and even his justice, that an upright heart redeems an involuntary error, and that [1073] blameless morals are worth at least as much as a thousand bizarre rites prescribed by men and rejected by reason? I shall say more; if I had the choice of purchasing good works at the price of



my faith, and of making up for my supposed nonbelief by dint of virtue, I would not hesitate for one instant; and I would rather be able to say to God: without thinking of you, I have done the good that is pleasing to you, and my heart conformed to your will without knowing it; than to say to him, as some day I shall have to do: Alas! I loved you and never ceased to offend you; I have known you, and done nothing to please you.

[34] There is, I admit, a kind of profession of faith which the laws may impose; but beyond the principles of morality and of natural right, it ought to be purely negative, because there can exist Religions that attack the foundations of society, and one has to begin by exterminating these Religions in order to insure the peace of the State. Among these dogmas that ought to be proscribed, intolerance is easily the most odious; but it must be checked at its source; for the most bloodthirsty Fanatics change their language as their fortune changes, and when they are not the strongest, they preach nothing but patience and gentleness. Thus I call intolerant on principle any man who imagines that one cannot be a good man without believing everything he believes, and mercilessly damns all those who do not think as he does. Indeed, the faithful are rarely inclined to leave reprobates in peace in this world; and a Saint who believes himself to be living with the damned readily preempts the devil's work. And if there were intolerant nonbelievers who wanted to force the people to believe nothing, I would banish them no less sternly than those who want to force the people to believe whatever they please.

[35] I would wish, then, that in every State there were a moral code, or a kind of civil profession of faith, containing, positively, the social maxims everyone would be bound to acknowledge, and, negatively, the fanatical maxims one would be bound to reject, not as impious, but as seditious. Thus every Religion that could conform to the code would be allowed; every Religion that did not conform to it would be proscribed; and everyone would be free to have no other Religion than the code itself. This work, done with [1074] care, would be the most useful book ever composed, it seems to me, and perhaps the only one needful to men. Here, Sir, is a subject for you. I passionately wish you might be willing to undertake this work and to adorn it with your Poetry, so that from childhood on, everyone being able to learn it easily, it might instill in



all hearts those sentiments of gentleness and humanity which shine in your writings, and which the devout have always lacked. I urge you to meditate on this project, which must appeal at least to your soul. In your *Poem on Natural Religion* you gave us the Catechism of man: give us now, in the one I am suggesting to you, the Catechism of the Citizen. It is a matter calling for long meditation, and perhaps to be reserved for the last of your works, in order to consummate with a benefaction to mankind the most brilliant career ever run by a man of letters.

[36] I cannot help, Sir, noting in this connection a rather odd contrast between yourself and myself on the subject of this letter. Replete with glory, and with no illusions about vain grandeurs, you live free in the midst of abundance; assured of immortality, you philosophize serenely about the nature of the soul; and if the body or the heart suffers, you have Tronchin for physician and friend: yet you find only evil on earth. And I, obscure, poor, and racked by an incurable disease, I meditate with pleasure in my retreat, and find that all is well [*or*: good]. Where do these apparent contradictions come from? You yourself have given the explanation: you enjoy; but I hope, and hope embellishes everything.

[37] I have as much trouble letting go of this tiresome letter as you will have finishing it. Forgive me, great man, a zeal that may be indiscreet but that would not unburden itself to you if I esteemed you less. God forbid that I might wish to give offense to the one among my contemporaries whose talents I most honor, and whose writings speak best to my heart; but what is at stake is the cause of Providence from which I expect everything. After having so long derived solace and courage from your lessons, it is hard on me that you now deprive me of all this, to offer me no more than an uncertain and vague hope, [1075] rather as a present palliative than as a future reward. No: I have suffered too much in this life not to expect another. All the subtleties of Metaphysics will not make me doubt for one moment the immortality of the soul and a beneficent Providence. I sense it, I want it, I hope for it, I shall defend it to my last breath; and of all disputations I will have engaged in, it will be the only one in which my own interest will not have been forgotten.

I am, Sir, etc.



*Fanaticism, or Mohammed the Prophet* (1741). Thyestes drink his son's blood In Crébillon's *Atreus and Thyestes* (1707) Thyestes caused his brother Atreus to kill his own son; in revenge Atreus killed Thyestes's son and, at a banquet, offered him a goblet with the son's blood. [20] I had said so In the *Second Discourse* I [25].

#### REPLY TO LE ROY (pages 229–231)

Rousseau jotted down this reply at the bottom of the pages of a note by Charles-Georges Le Roy (1723–1789), Master of the King's Hunt, the author of several entries in the *Encyclopedia*, and of the anonymously published *Lettres philosophiques sur l'intelligence et la perfectibilité des animaux* (1768, expanded 1781; and again in 1802). Le Roy was a childhood friend of Helvétius, and it was he who hatched and largely carried out the scheme of getting *De l'esprit* past the censors.

Le Roy's note had been forwarded to Rousseau by Condillac who, in a covering letter, indicated that Buffon agreed with these objections if, indeed, he was not their author (CC IV, 98f., 7 September 1756, no. 434). The objections are aimed at Rousseau's suggestion that man may not by nature be carnivorous; and, more generally, at his premise that everything in nature is well ordered. "Make sure of your facts, and perhaps you will find that it is not the case that everything is well ordered." Rousseau speaks to this issue most fully in the *Letter to Voltaire*; see also the Editorial Note to *Languages* 9 [32]\*.

Le Roy's criticisms and Rousseau's *Replies* to them were first published by Vaughan, under the title "Reply to a Naturalist," *Rousseau*, vol. 1, app. 1, pp. 512f. R. A. Leigh identified the writer of the criticisms, and he includes a full critical edition of the relevant texts in CC IV, app. A 172, pp. 423–426; as does Meier in *Diskurs/Discours*, pp. 482–489.

Rousseau's *Reply* has also been edited by Starobinski, in OC III, 237, reprinted together with Le Roy's comments in Starobinski's "Folio" edition of the *Second Discourse* (Gallimard, Paris, 1989), pp. 167, 276f.; and by Launay, in the *Intégrale Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 275.

#### LETTER TO VOLTAIRE (pages 232–246)

Voltaire was moved by the terrible earthquake which struck Lisbon in 1755, and which wreaked such widespread destruction and caused the death of so many thousands of people, to write a long *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne, ou examen de cet axiome: "tout est bien"* (*Poem on the Lisbon Disaster, or examination of the axiom "All is Good"*). It was



published together with an earlier poem on natural law in March 1756. Rousseau received a copy of these *Poèmes sur le désastre de Lisbonne et sur la loi naturelle* in July. He recounts the circumstances surrounding his writing this *Letter* in response to Voltaire's poems in *Conf.* ix (OC I, 429–430), and of its publication in *Conf.* x (OC I, 539–542). For full details, see R. A. Leigh, "Rousseau's Letter to Voltaire on Optimism," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (1964), 30:247–309, summarized in CC IV, 50–59; and in B. Gagnebin's "Notice bibliographique," OC IV, 1880–1884. Voltaire acknowledged Rousseau's *Letter* in a brief, conciliatory note (12 September 1756, CC IV, 102, no. 437), in which he did not speak to the issues which Rousseau had raised in his *Letter*. Rousseau believed that Voltaire wrote *Candide* as his full reply to the *Letter* (*Conf.* ix, OC I, 430).

The *Letter* has most recently been edited by R. A. Leigh in CC IV, 37–84; by Henri Gouhier in OC IV, 1059–1075; by Theodore Besterman in his *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. CI (*Correspondance*, vol. XVII) (The Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, Oxford, 1971), pp. 280–297; and by Gilbert Fauconnier in *Etudes Rousseauistes et index J.-J. Rousseau*, Série B, vol. v (Slatkine, Geneva, 1979), pp. 152–359. The present translation is based on the OC version of the text; departures from it are flagged in the Editorial Notes; the Notes also reproduce variant readings that might be of interest to attentive readers who are not Rousseau specialists.

[1] I do not know at whose instance these might have come to me, if not yours. Voltaire had indeed asked to have copies sent to Diderot, to d'Alembert, and to Rousseau. Charles Duclos had asked to be the one who would transmit Rousseau's copy to him: Thieriot to Voltaire, 6 July 1756.

[3] You charge Pope and Leibniz with insulting our evils by maintaining that all is well [*or: good*] "All is right [*or: good*]" translates *tout est bien*, the formula by which contemporary French translators rendered Pope's "whatever is, is right" (*An Essay on Man*, Epistle I, line 294, Epistle IV, line 394). However, *tout est bien* becomes a formula in its own right and with its own meaning in Voltaire's *Poem*, and especially in Rousseau's *Letter*. For *bien* (n., adv.), *bon* (adj.), i.e. "good" and "well," are central to his understanding of man and of his place in the scheme of things. A further reason for preserving an explicit reference to "good" in translating *tout est bien* is that both Voltaire and Rousseau are concerned not only with Pope's dictum, but also with Leibniz's proposition that this is "the best (*optimum*) of all possible worlds" (*Theodicy* I, §§ 8–10 *et passim*). The same difficulties that surround the attempt to translate *bon* and *bien* surround the



attempt to translate its antonym, *mal* (n., adv.). Used as a noun, it may mean “pain,” “hurt,” or, especially in the plural (*maux*), “ills,” as in “. . . and makes us rather bear those ills we have . . .”; but also, as it does here, “evil.” Similar difficulties surround *malheur* (n), *malheureux* (n., adj.), which may mean “unhappiness” and “unhappy,” “misfortune” and “unfortunate,” but also “wretch” and “wretched.”

[7] You do not wish, Sir, to have your work looked upon as a work against Providence: “I do not rise up against Providence,” Voltaire, *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster*, line 232; however, Voltaire is reported to have told Pastor Jacob Vernet “. . . de cette affaire [*sc.* le tremblement de terre de Lisbonne] la Providence en a dans le cul” (cited by Henri Gouhier, *Rousseau et Voltaire* [Vrin, Paris, 1983], p.76); although you taxed a book in which I pleaded the case of mankind against itself with being a writing against mankind; Voltaire’s letter acknowledging Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality* begins: “I am in receipt, Sir, of your new book against mankind,” 30 August 1755, CC III, 156 (no. 317).

[8] if . . . it is a contradiction for matter to be both sentient and insentient In a passage which provoked the most intense controversy, Locke had said that he saw no contradiction in some systems of senseless matter having a power to perceive and think: *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* IV, 3, § vi; Rousseau returns to the point in his *Letter to Franquières* [5] (in SC tr.). Voltaire’s sympathetic discussion of Locke’s suggestion in the thirteenth of his immensely popular *Philosophical Letters* had given it wide currency on the Continent. I believe I have shown . . . most of our physical evils are also of our own making in *First Discourse*, Part I, *Second Discourse* I [9], II [13].

[9] You would have wished . . . the quake had happened in . . . a wilderness Voltaire, *Poem*, lines 53–55. Also consider, in this connection, the discussion of cataclysms in the *Second Discourse* II [14], and of “the ancient traditions about natural disasters” in *Languages*, 9 [27].

[10] I learned in *Zadig* . . . that a quick death In chapter XX of his novel *Zadig, or Destiny*, Voltaire has the character he calls The Hermit and also The Angel Jesrad kill off perfectly innocent persons before they commit the evils they are “destined” to commit. the ordinary course of things; the expression, which recurs two paragraphs below, is reminiscent of Bacon’s “common course of nature” and “common course of the universe” (*Novum Organum*, The Second Book of Aphorisms, especially no. xvii); and of Spinoza’s “common order of nature” (*Ethics* II, 29, scholium; II, 30, proof; IV, 4, corollary). Both Bacon and Spinoza use the expression to characterize what might be called the world of ordinary or common experience in contrast to rational or



scientific accounts of nature; in other words, a – if not the – central issue of this *Letter*. Locke contrasts “the ordinary course of things” with miracles: e.g. *Essay* IV, 16, §§ xiii, xiv; as does Hume “the ordinary course of events,” “the course of nature” and “the common and experienced course of nature,” e.g. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* xi, “Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State” and “Of the Immortality of the Soul,” *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (Longman Green and Co., London, 1889, 1912), vol. II, p. 400. Rousseau’s expression “the order of human things” ([25]) would appear to be equivalent to “the ordinary course of things.” Voltaire, by contrast, does not draw this distinction between ordinary experience and rational or scientific accounts when he lays it down that it is “the general order of the world” that some events do, and some do not, have effects, “that the links in the chain [of events] would not be disturbed by a little more or a little less matter, by a little more or a little less irregularity” (*Poem*, note 1; quoted more fully in the Editorial Note to [17] below). This is the thesis which Rousseau will most insistently challenge in the immediate sequel. In considering how he thinks about the great chain of beings, one might also note that on one occasion, speaking about parthenogenesis, which he calls “contrary to the ordinary march of nature,” he is led to raise fundamental questions about the status of natural kinds or species: *Fragments pour un dictionnaire des termes d’usage en botanique*, article “Aphrodites,” OC IV, 1212; consider also the 1782 correction to *Second Discourse* P [3], p. 353 above.

[11] . . . difficult . . . to find . . . good computations among Philosophers Voltaire had written

“*Ce malheur, dites vous, est le bien d’un autre être.*”  
*Quand la mort met le comble aux maux que j’ai soufferts,*  
*Le beau soulagement d’être mangé des vers!*  
*Tristes calculateurs des misères humaines,*  
*Ne me consolez point, vous aigrissez mes peines . . .*

(97–101)

On the philosophers’ calculations of the goods and evils of life, see also *Second Discourse* N IX [1] above. the sweet sentiment of existence see *Discourse on Inequality* I [21] and the corresponding Editorial Note, p. 143 above.

[12] You think with Erasmus that few people would wish to be reborn Voltaire makes the point (*Poem*, line 210), without citing Erasmus; Rousseau is referring to Erasmus, *Colloquies* (“The Godly Feast”), from which he evidently also drew the two Cicero quotations



below (R. A. Leigh). the country where you are Voltaire was living near Geneva at the time. willingly trade even Paradise some manuscripts of this frequently reworked *Letter* read “willingly trade even the Paradise he expects and is owed . . .” (CC IV, 59, n. 54) who can say with Cato . . . *Nec me vixisse poenitet, quoniam ita vixi, ut frustra me natum non existimem*, a slightly modified version of a remark which Cicero attributes to the Elder Cato in his dialogue *De senectute* (*On Old Age*) XXIII, 84; Rousseau borrows the passage from Erasmus, *Colloquies*, 156 (R. A. Leigh, in CC IV, 66).

[14] As regards M. de Crouzas, . . . I trust his authority as little as I do his proofs. Reading with the ms. and the text published by Leigh; OC reads: “I trust his proofs just as little as I do his authority.” Jean-Pierre de Crouzaz (1663–1750) had published two criticisms of Pope’s *Essay*, and Rousseau had read – and rejected – at least one of these at the same time as he first read Pope’s *Essay* itself: to François de Conzié, 17 January 1742, CC I, 132–139, no. 43; Voltaire calls Crouzaz “a learned Geometer” (*Poem*, n. 1); in his reply, Rousseau had initially called him “a poor geometer and an even poorer reasoner,” adding that his reputation was altogether undeserved; in the final version of the *Letter* he chose to omit these judgments. However, in the *Nouvelle Héloïse* he has his character Julie write: “M. de Crouzaz has just given us a refutation of Pope’s Epistles which I have read with some annoyance. Truth to tell, I do not know which one of these two authors is right; but I do know that M. de Crouzaz’s book will never lead to a good deed’s being done, and that there is nothing good one is not tempted to do upon setting down Pope’s book. I have not, for my own part, any other way of judging what I read than to inquire how it leaves my soul disposed, and I can scarcely imagine what can be the good of a book that does not incline its readers to good” (NH II, 18, OC II, 261); for Diderot’s extensive critical remarks on its first French translation, see his *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 191–266. Pope, as might be expected, shared Rousseau’s judgment of Crouzaz: he reserved a place for him in the *Dunciad* (IV, 198). actions without a principle and effects without a cause; which is at odds with all philosophy. Voltaire’s – and Crouzaz’s – argument is specifically directed against the position adopted by Leibniz, and which Rousseau here restates in his own name: cp. e.g. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, § VI.

[17] You draw a distinction between events that have effects, and those that do not. Again in direct response to a point of Voltaire’s: “. . . every . . . [event] has its cause in the event which precedes it; this is something no philosopher has ever doubted. If Caesar’s



mother had not undergone a Caesarian section, Caesar would not have destroyed the republic, he would not have adopted Octavius, and Octavius would not have left the empire to Tiberius. Maximilian marries the heiress of Burgundy and the Low Countries, and this marriage becomes the source of two hundred years of war. But Caesar's having spat to the right or to the left, the heiress of Burgundy having her hair dressed one way or another, surely did not change anything in the general system.

"There are, then, events that have effects, and others that do not. The chain of events is comparable to a genealogical tree; some branches are seen to die out, and others perpetuate the race. A number of events remain without filiation. Thus in every machine there are effects which are necessary to the movement, and others which are indifferent to it, which are the consequence of the first, and produce nothing. The wheels of a carriage make it go; but the journey gets accomplished just as well regardless of whether they make a little more or a little less dust fly. Such is the general order of the world that the links in the chain [of events] would not be disturbed by a little more or a little less matter, a little more or a little less irregularity" (note 1 to the *Poem*).

Voltaire's argument again takes issue with Leibniz, specifically with his thesis that "... the notion of an individual substance contains once and for all everything that can ever happen to it, and that in considering this notion one can see in it everything it will be possible truthfully to say about it, just as we can see in the nature of the circle all the properties that can be deduced from it" (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, § XIII). Leibniz goes on, in this same section of the *Discourse*, to illustrate his thesis with Caesar as his example. ... just as several almost imperceptible effects frequently combine to produce a considerable event. The same argument is stated more tersely at the end of the first half of the *Second Discourse*, 1 [53]. the grain of sand mentioned by Pascal: "Cromwell was going to lay waste the whole of Christendom; the royal family was lost, and his own forever in power, but for a small grain of sand that settled in his ureter. Rome itself was going to be threatened by him; but with this tiny stone settled there, he is dead, his family cast low, everything at peace, and the king restored" *Pensées* (Brunschvicg no. 176). I share your Brahman's opinion. Traditionally editors have taken this to be a reference to the "hermit" in Voltaire's novel *Zadig*, ch. xx; Masters and Kelly (in their edition of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, Polemics, and Political Economy* [Dartmouth, Hanover, NH, 1992], p. 194, n. 15) plausibly suggest that it is a reference to Voltaire's short *Dialogue entre un Brachmane et un Jésuite sur la nécessité et l'enchaînement des choses*"



(*Dialogue Between a Brahman and a Jesuit About the Necessity and Connectedness of Things*), first published in the year in which Rousseau wrote this *Letter*. The *Dialogue* concludes with the following exchange:

- The Jesuit: If I understand you, one would not have to pray [to] God?
- The Brahman: One has to adore him. But what do you understand by praying [to] him?
- The Jesuit: What everybody understands by it; that he favor our desires, that he satisfy our needs.
- The Brahman: I understand you. You want a gardener to have sun at the very hour God destined from all eternity for rain, and a pilot to have an east wind when there has to be a west wind to cool the earth and seas. Father, to pray is to submit . . .

[19] the nature of light and of lighted spaces i.e. how light propagates through space. Bayle, for whose wisdom and restraint in matters of opinion I share your admiration . . . In the notes to his *Poem*, Voltaire defends Bayle against the attacks on his impieties by noting that Cicero said far worse without being censured for it (*Poem*, n. 1). Rousseau turns this defense of Bayle into an attack on Voltaire by charging him with professing Bayle's skepticism regarding moral and political matters, while being dogmatic regarding natural science; Rousseau here presents himself as being, by contrast, a skeptic regarding natural science who, for that very reason, is hesitant to be dogmatically skeptical about what might be called the moral and political "ordinary course of things."

[20] you have made a correction in Pope's system . . . by observing . . . "God holds the chain, and is not chained by it" *Poem on the Lisbon Disaster* (line 75). Rousseau had argued for this view at some length in his 1742 letter to de Conzié, CC I, 133–136; it is not entirely clear that Pope said or meant anything different.

[21] you have man say: "I must be as dear to my master . . . as the planets." In a note to the Preface to his *Poem*.

[22] That a man's corpse feeds worms . . . is not . . . a compensation for that man's death Voltaire, *Poem*, lines 97–100 (quoted in the Editorial Note to [10] above). Codrus, king of Athens, upon learning that according to an oracle the invading Dorians would conquer Athens if they avoided killing her king, entered the Dorians' camp in disguise and provoked a fight in which he was slain; the Dorians, upon learning what had happened, ended their campaign and returned home; no one was thought fit to be king after Codrus, the kingship was abolished, and his son and heir was installed as Archon. Curtius Manlius:



according to legend, when a chasm opened up in the Roman Forum, the soothsayers declared that it would close up only once Rome's greatest treasure was cast into it; Curtius, proclaiming that a virtuous citizen was the city's greatest treasure, rode into the chasm in full battle-gear; whereupon the chasm disappeared. the Decii, father as well as son, both of them consuls, sacrificed their lives in two different wars to secure Roman victories. the Philaeni, two Carthaginian brothers who accepted being buried alive to enlarge their City's territory.

[23] . . . instead of saying *All is well* [or: good] (*Tout est bien*), it might be preferable to say *The whole is good* or *All is good for the whole* (*Le tout est bien*). The addition of the article in *Le tout est bien* changes "all" into "the all" or, more idiomatically, "the whole." Contrast these formulations with *Genesis* 1:31.

[24] the Priests and the Devout, who . . . depending on whether they end up with goods or evils. I.e. who claim they are predestined to be saved or damned, elected or reprobated, and that their being good in this life does not affect the outcome; it follows that the outcome, regardless of what it is, confirms what was said to have been predestined. Rousseau develops the point in the next paragraph, beginning with "By contrast, a devout person . . ."

[25] as Seneca says in *On Providence* VI, 1; Cartouche the notorious highwayman; see Editorial Note to *Observations* [53], p. 335 above; why were they allowed to live? Again, the character Voltaire calls The Hermit and also The Angel Jesrad in his *Zadig, or Destiny* therefore kills off perfectly innocent persons before they have a chance to commit the evils they are "destined" to commit. While Voltaire intends this tale as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Leibniz's "optimism," Rousseau implies that such preemptive murders would be the logical consequence of Voltaire's attack on "optimism," and that his attack therefore collapses in *reductio ad absurdum*. . . . Providence is exclusively universal . . . "God . . . governs by general, not particular laws": Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle IV, Argument (1), cp. Epistle I, lines 145f. and Epistle IV, lines 35f. "What misleads in this matter . . . is that one finds oneself inclined to believe that what is best in the whole is also the best possible in each part . . . but the part of the best whole is not necessarily the best that could be made of that part . . .": Leibniz, *Theodicy*, §§ 212, 213. Regarding this issue, see also *Philopolis* [11] and Editorial Note. Julie and Saint-Preux, the two main characters of Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, discuss the question of "general laws" in terms of the role and efficacy of prayer, as well as of specifically Christian debates about grace and election. Julie writes: "According to you, this act of humility [i.e. prayer] is without benefit to us, and God,



having given us everything that can incline us to good by giving us conscience, thereafter abandons us to ourselves and lets our freedom act. That is not, as you know, the doctrine of Saint Paul nor is it that professed in our Church . . . To listen to you, it would seem that it is a bother for it [i.e. the divine power] to watch over each individual; you fear that a divided and constant attention might tire it, and you find it fairer that it do everything by general laws no doubt because they cost it less care" (NH, VI, 6; OC II, 672). Saint-Preux replies: "I . . . do not believe that after having provided in every way for man's needs, God grants to one person rather than to another some extraordinary assistance, which the one who abuses the common assistance does not deserve, and the one who uses it well does not need. This acceptance of persons does injury to divine justice. Even if this harsh and discouraging doctrine could be deduced from Scripture itself, is not my first duty to honor God? However much respect I may owe the sacred text, I owe its Author more, and I would rather believe the Bible falsified or unintelligible than God unjust or maleficent" (NH VI, 7; OC II, 684; see also *ib.* v, 5; OC II, 595f.; cp. Bayle, "every literal sense [of the biblical text] which entails the obligation to commit crimes is false": "Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de l'évangile: contrainct-les d'entrer," *Oeuvres diverses* [Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, Hildesheim, 1955, reprint of the 1727 edition published at The Hague], vol. II, pp. 367–560, pp. 367, cp. p. 374). When the Censor's Office required that Saint-Preux's remark be struck, Rousseau replied "These pages must remain exactly as they are. If Saint-Preux wants to be heretical regarding grace, that is his business. Besides, it is necessary that he defend man's freedom, since elsewhere he makes the abuse of this freedom the cause of moral evil: he absolutely has to be a Molinist if he is not to be a Manichean . . ." (to Malesherbes, March 1761, CC VIII, 237; cp. *ib.* p. 120.) *Nature wanted us . . . Commorandi enim Natura diversorium nobis, non habitandi dedit*: Cicero, *De senectute*, XXIII, 84; it is still the elder Cato speaking.

[28] Sorbonne The University of Paris. It became the seat of the Faculty of Theology, which took sides and issued condemnations in all debates that affected the faith. In 1762 it condemned Rousseau's *Emile* in a Pastoral Letter (*mandement*) issued in the name of the Archbishop of Paris, Christophe de Beaumont.

[29] I naïvely admit i.e. artlessly and spontaneously. neither the *pro* nor the *con* seems to me demonstrated . . . add the weight of hope to the equilibrium of reason. This important argument is reminiscent of a suggestion of Bayle's in his discussion of Spinoza's claim (*Ethics* II, 49, scholium) that just as Buridan's ass caught at equal



distance between two stacks of feed would starve to death, so would man be unable to choose between two equally compelling ideas: Bayle counters that men could break this equilibrium by imagining themselves to be their own masters, independent of the objects between which they are choosing, saying "I choose to do this rather than that because it pleases me to do so." The decision would then be exclusively based on their idea that they are free. Bayle's suggestion combines the appearance of free will with its denial. Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, "Buridan," Note C (near the end). Bayle's suggestion is discussed by Leibniz, *Theodicy* III, § 307.

[30] (I remember . . . Rousseau omitted this important paragraph from the copy of the *Letter* which he sent to Voltaire. Some editors therefore print it separately. It was first published by Streckeisen-Moultou in his 1861 edition of the *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.-J. Rousseau* with a note explaining that it was part of the ms. of the *Letter* in his possession. Rousseau made substantially the same point he makes here in a letter to Vernes on 18 February 1758; in the *Letter to Franquières* [11] of 25 March 1769 (OC IV, 1139; see SC tr.); in the *Fiction ou Morceau allégorique sur la révélation* (*Fiction or Allegory about Revelation*), an important fragment that was given this title and also first published by Streckeisen-Moultou in *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites*, now in OC IV, 1046; and he attributes it to the Savoyard Vicar: "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" (*Emile* IV; OC IV, 579; tr. pp. 275f.). . . . the twenty-first philosophical thought, i.e. the twenty-first of Diderot's *Pensées philosophiques* (*Philosophical Thoughts*), a book which had led to their author's imprisonment in Vincennes, and to which Rousseau had already referred, cautiously but openly, in *First Discourse* [51]\*, above. the most forceful thing ever said Reading a *jamais dit* with Leigh (CC IV, 61) and as the sense requires; OC reads *n'a jamais dit*. both seem . . . equally convincing, only the latter persuades me Rousseau draws the contrast convince/persuade in a number of other places: the *Preface to "Narcissus"* [2]; *Languages* 4 [4] and 19 [2]; the *Emile* IV (OC IV, 453); *NH* V, 5 (OC II, 594f.) in the context of a discussion of the origin of evil; and, most particularly, SC I 7 [9]. Some of these passages are discussed in Christopher Kelly's "To persuade without convincing": The Language of Rousseau's Legislator," *American Journal of Political Science* (1987), 31:321-325. The distinction is traditional: to convince is to prove or demonstrate, to persuade is to move to action; proof is properly the province of philosophy and science; persuasion is properly the province of rhetoric (e. g. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 2, 1355b 26f). the *Henriade* was composed Diderot had given Voltaire's poem as his example in the *Philosophical*



*Thought* which Rousseau is here discussing. This *Thought* is intended as a refutation of the traditional anti-materialist objection (in its Stoic anti-Epicurean version: Cicero, *Of the Nature of the Gods* II, 37); see also, e.g., Plato, *Laws* X, 889b–892c (however, compare *Phaedo* 99b3–d3 and Leibniz’s singular use of this comment in his *Discourse on Metaphysics* §§ XIX, XX); Aristotle, *Physics* II, 196a 24–196b 4, 198a 5–13, 199b 5–7. what . . . I call *proof of sentiment* called *prejudice* Rousseau must have been acquainted with Bayle’s judgment: “Proofs of sentiment settle nothing . . . Every people is imbued with proofs of sentiment for its religion: they are therefore more often false than true”: *Continuation des pensées diverses*, in *Oeuvres diverses*, vol. XX (p. 214b).

[31] I think . . . one cannot too forcefully attack the superstition that disturbs society, nor too much respect the Religion that upholds it. In the so-called “ms. 2” this sentence initially read “Thus I could not approve of reasoning about such subjects in public in popular language [*langage vulgaire*] and, if I may say so, still less in verse.”

[32] regardless of what the Sophist Hobbes may have said . . . All editors refer to Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chs. XXX and/or XXXI, and to *De cive*, ch. xv. The problem with these references is not that Rousseau may not have known the *Leviathan* at first hand; but that Hobbes consistently defends the same view as Rousseau, that the state has no control over what happens *in foro interno*: “There is another Errour in their [*sc.* the Clergy’s] Civill Philosophy (which they never learned of Aristotle, nor Cicero, nor any other of the Heathen,) to extend the power of the Law, which is the Rule of actions onely, to the very Thoughts and Consciences of men, by Examination and *Inquisition* of what they Hold, notwithstanding the Conformity of their Speech and Actions[;] . . . to force him [*sc.* a man] to accuse himself of Opinions, when his Actions are not by Law forbidden, is against the Law of Nature; and especially in them, who teach, that a man shall bee damned to Eternall and extream torments, if he die in a false opinion concerning an Article of the Christian Faith”: Hobbes, *Leviathan* ch. IV, 46. The barb at Hobbes must therefore be read – like so much else in this *Letter* – as a concession to popular opinion or sentiment.

[34] the principles of morality and of natural right For the use of “natural right” in this context, see “reasoned natural right” in the *Geneva ms.* II, 4 [14], and the Introduction to *SC* tr. And if there were intolerant nonbelievers who wanted to force the people to believe nothing, I would banish them no less sternly than those who want to force the people to believe whatever they please. In “ms. 2” Rousseau goes on as follows at this point: “For one sees in the zealotry of their judgments [*crossed out*: in the acidulousness of



the atheism that devours them and the imperious haughtiness of their judgments], in the bitterness of their satires, that they only lack being masters to persecute believers just as cruelly as they are themselves persecuted by the fanatics. Where is the peaceable and gentle man who finds it good that one not think as he does? This man will certainly never be found among the devout and he still remains to be found among the philosophers.”

[35] I would wish, then, . . . a kind of civil profession of faith, containing, positively . . . and, negatively, the fanatical maxims one would be bound to reject, not as impious, but as seditious. “Ms. 1” goes on: “Furthermore I would like the State to let particulars dispose freely of their conscience as they will always dispose of it in spite of the State.” every Religion that could conform to the code, would be allowed; every Religion that did not conform to it, would be proscribed; and everyone would be free to have no other Religion than the code itself. “Ms. 1” goes on: “Priestly disputes, since they could never disturb the peace, would keep the devout occupied and the wise amused without danger.” I passionately wish . . . which the devout have always lacked. In “ms. 2” Rousseau crossed out the last clause, and substituted: “which in practice everyone lacks.” I urge you to meditate on this project, which must appeal at least to your soul. In “ms. 2” Rousseau crossed out “your soul” and replaced it with “the author of *Alzire*.”

[36] Dr. Théodore Tronchin (1709–1781), renowned physician at the time; Rousseau sent him this *Letter* with a covering note requesting that he transmit it to Voltaire (18 August 1756; CC IV, 85f., no. 425); Tronchin’s acknowledgment of that note (1 September 1756; CC IV, 93–95, no. 431) draws a sharp and rather unflattering portrait of Voltaire. you enjoy Voltaire’s villa outside Geneva was called “Les Délices,” “The Delights”; but I hope, and hope embellishes everything. The status of hope is central to this debate. As Pope had made clear early in his own poem, the hope at issue is first and foremost hope for the immortality of the individual soul (*Essay on Man*, Epistle I, lines 91–98). Now, the first, unauthorized, publications of Voltaire’s poem ended

*Mortels, il faut souffrir,  
Se soumettre en silence, adorer et mourir.*

Mortals, we must suffer,  
Submit in silence, adore and die.

He quickly recognized that ordinary readers and, more to the point, the ecclesiastical authorities, might think this conclusion too gloomy.



He therefore inserted “hope” between “adore” and “die.” Even this seemed inadequate, and he re-worked the ending massively. He now summarized his difference with Leibniz and Pope as follows

*Someday all will be good [or: well], such is our hope;  
All is good [or: well] now, such is the illusion.*

and now ends the poem

*Un calife autrefois, à son heure dernière,  
Au Dieu qu'il adorait dit pour toute prière;  
“Je t'apporte, ô seul roi, seul être illimité,  
Tout ce que tu n'as pas dans ton immensité,  
Les défauts, les regrets, les maux, et l'ignorance.”  
Mais il pouvait encore ajouter, “l'espérance.”*

Once a Caliph, in his final hour,  
To the God he adored said as his only prayer,  
“I bring you, O sole king, sole boundless being,  
All that, in your immensity, you have not,  
Failings, regrets, evils, and ignorance.”  
But he could also have added, *hope*.

In what appears to have been Voltaire's own copy of the poem, the lines

*Someday all will be good [or: well], such is our hope;  
All is good [or: well] now, such is the illusion!*

were changed in his own hand to read

*Someday all will be good [or: well], what a frail hope!  
All is good [or: well], what an illusion!*

and the final period of the last line is changed into a question mark:

But could he also have added *hope*?

followed by a long note about the widely held belief in the immortality of the individual soul. (See George R. Havens, “Voltaire's Pessimistic Revision of his Conclusion of his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*,” *Modern Language Notes* (1929), 44:489–493.)